

Cathedral of Saint Vibiana
2nd and Main Streets
Los Angeles, Los Angeles County
California

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PHOTOGRAPH
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
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CAL-343
Page 1

CATHEDRAL OF SAINT VIBIANA

Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, California

ADDRESS: 2nd and Main Streets
OWNER: Archdiocese of Los Angeles
OCCUPANT: Roman Catholic Church
USE: Cathedral of the Archdiocese

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Cathedral of St. Vibiana, built during the years 1871-1875, was for a number of years one of the finest structures built in Southern California since statehood. Until the late 1880's, it was the largest church building in the City of Los Angeles. Designated an Historical Landmark by the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles, May 10, 1963.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The ceremonies of laying the cornerstone took place on the afternoon of October 3, 1869. Pontifical Mass was celebrated, which was followed by sermons in both English and Spanish. Dedication took place on the west side of Main Street, just north of the 6th Street crossing. As this was eventually considered to be too far from the center of town, and too close to the Chapel maintained by the Vincentian Fathers several blocks down the street, the site was moved northward to the present location at 2nd and Main Streets. Almost no construction had been started at the first location due to the general depression during the late 1860's.

CAL-343
Page 2

Work at the new (present) site began in May of 1871, and the edifice was dedicated April 30, 1876. It was designed by Ezra F. Kyser, who was later to be assisted by W. J. Mathews. The general plan of the church was very liberally copied from the Church of the Puerto de San Miguel in Barcelona, Spain. It was wider than the original prototype, but the details were somewhat similar. The Spanish original does not have a belfry, which was added by Mr. Kyser. The Church was to be 80 feet wide and 160 feet long, laid out on a typical "Basilica Plan". The entire structure was of brick, with the belfry at the rear (east) of the building. This feature, based on designs by Sir Christopher Wren in his smaller churches, has often been noted as its finest feature.

Ornamental stone came from the local source of Bashard and Hamilton, with the iron fence at the west sidewalk (now demolished) from the firm of Page and Gravel.

The interior features seven slender corinthian columns, a vaulted plaster ceiling, and the usual side aisles common to the Basilica style of church buildings. The wood columns are fluted, and painted in imitation of marble. Frescoe work on the ceiling and about the interior was the work of an Alexander Zins, which featured "Greco-Mosaics" as the paper of the day described them. Stiff high backed pews, with heavy ornamental finials on the aisles filled the nave. The present retable and altar of Parian and Carrara marble and Mexican onyx were added in 1894. A crypt under the Sanctuary area and the later addition of a residence for the bishop completed the complex of buildings.

Structurally the building remained virtually unchanged until 1922, when extensive renovations were made under the direction of John C. Austin, veteran church architect. At this time some of the ceilings were altered, the exterior north and south side walls of the church plastered, new painted "art glass" panels placed in the windows, and the frontal portion of the church extended out to the line of the sidewalk. This addition necessitated the complete removal of the original facade, but gave the addition of a narthex and the adjoining baptistry. While the original structure had been completely of unpainted brick (with the possible exception of the upper portions of the belfry pavilion), the new facade, being a liberal copy of the original, was of Indiana limestone. The new "art glass" windows were the work of the Meyer firm in Munich, Germany, and the limestone facade came from the firm of J. Hoadly and Sons, Indiana.

CAL-343
Page 3

A number of notable funerals have occurred in the church; Senator Stephen M. White, the chief exponent of the Los Angeles Harbor, February 23, 1901; and Madame Helena Modjeska, one of the greatest of nineteenth century actresses, on April 12, 1909. Two California Governors, John C. Downey and Henry T. Gage, were also honored with funeral services in the building.

The Architect, Ezra F. Kyser, is of particular interest in Los Angeles, as he was one of the earliest architects practicing in the city, whose work is fairly well documented. In addition to his work on the Cathedral, Kyser was also responsible for the design of the Merced Theater, the Pico House and the Nadeau House.

This pioneer architect was born in Cattaragus, New York in 1835, and died in Los Angeles in 1907. Before having arrived in Los Angeles (1868), he is thought to have done work in Virginia City, Nevada.

Kyser later joined with Octavius Morgan under the name of Kyser and Morgan. After the former's death, the firm became known as Morgan, Walls and Morgan, and by the 1920's was known as Morgan, Walls and Clements. Still in existence today, it is known as Styles and Robert Clements.

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Prepared by,

J. Thomas Owen
J. Thomas Owen

CAL-343
Page 4

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The following data is based upon existing records, drawings and specifications of later changes, photographs of the 19th century and contemporary accounts, most of which are in the archives of the Archdiocese of the Catholic Church in Los Angeles and supplementary files at the Rectory, adjacent to the Cathedral. Additionally, early photographs from Title Insurance and Trust Company of Los Angeles and visual inspections at the Cathedral complete the basis for this description.

EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions: Originally about 82' x 178' as shown by drawings by John C. Austin, architect for alterations in 1922, at which time the west (front) facade was extended about 24' to the sidewalk, giving its present length of 202'. Rectory and School adjacent not included.

Wall Construction: Original walls built of 18" brick with shallow buttresses (max. 30" projection at base) located at north and south walls, corresponding to the interior columns. The 1922 alterations covered the exposed brick with metal lath and stucco.

West Front: Originally the west elevation rose to a height of 60' from the ground to the top finial on the pediment (contemporary accounts). The design is compared with the church of Puerto de San Miguel in Barcelona, Spain. Careful examination of both facades indicates only a general relationship. Both are of Baroque Spanish style. Points of similarity were the general profile. St Vibiana's however, being wider; a similar arrangement of the main front doors, i.e., a taller pair of central doors flanked by a pair of smaller side doors, the central doors having a pediment and the smaller doors having segmental arched pediments; the main pediment of the roof with figures were similarly treated and both had pronounced scrolled buttresses at the lower roof. Points of dissimilarity included: San Miguel generally richer ornament in stone - Saint Vibiana's was of brick; the former has a central niche where the latter had a rose window (donated by the Santa Cruz Parish); the latter was flanked by niches with figures of Sts. Peter and Paul - in San Miguel there were no niches. The original facade of Saint Vibiana was designed with simple pairs of pilasters flanking the

CAL-343

Page 5

doors and central rose window - San Miguel has pairs of engaged columns; and where the latter has a cartouche decoration over the side doors - Saint Vibiana had a circular window. Also, where San Miguel has a classic entablature between the doors and central niche - Saint Vibiana had a simple pair of belt courses.

In 1922, John Austin extended the west front forward to create a deeper nave and gallery (balcony) with a new narthex. At this time, he attempted to be more faithful to the prototype. Accordingly the new walls were faced with cut stone (Indiana limestone), the gray color of which more nearly resembled San Miguel. It was backed up with brick, and reinforced concrete was used as a structural frame. The pedimented main gable was again used as the main form; however, the strong scrolled buttresses were now reduced to a point of insignificance. The double belt courses of the original at the pediment were now eliminated. The rose window flanked with niches were again provided but the former slightly recessed in a niche itself. The central door more strongly accented with a pediment and supported by coupled doric columns. The side doors still have the segmental arches above, but the side sections of the facade are now set back from the central section about 2', and the latter section still is flanked with pairs of pilasters as formerly.

The original west corners of the front had pairs of pilasters which returned around on the short north and side walls; between these was a blind arch. The alterations removed this pavilion effect by eliminating the pilasters and providing instead a severe stone wall punctuated by a semi-circular door and pairs of windows on the north, and a new semi-circular baptistry tower on the south west. The side doors now have niches above in lieu of the round windows. Where the lines of the entablature in the original continued around the corners unifying the whole front, the entablature now stops at the central section. Much texture and enrichment of lines have been lost in the changes. An all-stone balustrade now sets on the lower roofs of the west corners in lieu of the former brick rail and stone balustrade and the figures of the evangelists on the original were eliminated. A granite base and steps are also part of the additions. The total height of the west facade, from ground to apex of pediment, is now 62'.

Porches: Neither the original nor the present Cathedral include porches, although there was a small forecourt space between the

CAL-343
Page 6

former iron fence at the Main Street sidewalk and the entrances. With the extension to the street, the steps terminate directly on the sidewalk. A cloistered patio exists on the northeast between the Rectory (rebuilt after the 1933 earthquake) and the Cathedral.

Doorways and Doors: The present doors are all replacements, subsequent to the 1922 alterations. The west facade doors are pairs, $2\frac{1}{4}'$ thick with raised and moulded panels of oak veneer with matching solid paneled transoms above. The exit at the northwest corner has a semi-circular frame, within which are a pair of doors having glass panels guarded on the interior side by decorative metal spindles. Doors are flanked by sidelights. The frame and sash are hollow metal #22 ga. and painted to simulate wood grain. The exit doors at the side aisles by the chancel are of similar construction.

Windows: In general all of the windows in the old portion of the nave were replaced during the 1922 alterations. The new rose window in the west facade has 4 laminations of milled 2" redwood, moulded and shaped for the frame and $5/8"$ redwood stops, in which the new "art glass" painted designs was set.

The 12 original side aisle windows at north and south walls, which had wood frames and a central wood mullion, were removed in 1922, the sills of 6 windows were raised to provide new confessionals under and were replaced with new art glass in $1-3/4'$ soft pine sash, and $5/8"$ moulded stops. The exterior sash over this is hollow metal with $1/4"$ wire glass with a vent in the bottom light. The old brick moulding surrounding the windows around the flat arched heads have been retained but plastered and painted.

The 6 old semi-circular clerestory windows on each side of the upper nave walls were removed, enlarged in similar form and replaced with art glass in wood frames.

In the most westerly bay of the side aisles, the 2 original windows were replaced by new pairs of small double hung windows at both the lower nave level and the upper gallery. Westward, toward the street from here, Austin added three pairs of double hung windows stacked from ground floor and stair landing to the upper gallery. These are in wood frame and sash.

CAL-343
Page 7

Roof: The main nave roof still has the original wood trusses which are simple Howe type with sloping 2x6 rafters and struts, a center 2x12 kingpost tied to typical 2x12 bottom chords and spaced at 24" c.c. There are double 3x12 tie braces at bottom chords every 18' in lieu of 2x12s. Over the rafters is 1x16 T&G sheathing. The original finish roofing was tin sheeting. The main west front had a gable roof slightly raised above the nave roof. At the corners of the pediment were figures of the evangelists on brick pedestles and the apex was topped by a cross. An 1888 photo shows these pedestles changed to stone. The lower roofs over the side aisles are nearly flat. The 1922 changes included patching the roofing for the new west end extension and coating the tin with a colored metallic paint finish. The new west gable roof was built of reinforced concrete frame and some encased steel beams. The roof slab was finished with flat red Italian tile. The old nave roof was strengthened continuously along the north and south walls with lattice trusses and the old trusses were re-braced for new clerestory window enlargements.

Cornice: The original west facade had continuous double brick belt courses at the pediment, which extended around the sides, and dentil courses under the eaves. The brick entablature over the front doors also extended around the exterior side aisle walls in corbeled bands. The present west end has stone moulded cornices at the upper eaves and lower parapet. The west facade has a broken pediment which stops over the corner pilasters in lieu of the continuous belts.

Belfry: The most notable and the handsomest feature is the belfry at the east end of the nave over the central crypt. From the east end rising above the first floor, it is attached to the nave on one side only, thus presenting a gracefully designed unit which can be distinguished from the building for its full height. The lower third of the tower is strengthened at its corners by brick buttresses similar to the side walls. The central third is divided into two sections by brick belt courses and decorative corbeling. The top third begins with a short truncated roof, now covered with composition roofing, changing from a square tower base of brick to an octagonal belfry with platform, balustrade, arched openings, cupola roof and top lantern, all of wood.

The east facade of the tower, at its lower third, is punctuated with two arched windows, with art glass, one over the other.

The center third has a circular vent over a pair of square vents. At the lower truncated roof, there is a continuous brick belt course of corbels in a running triangular design, under the entablature with the cornice supported by a continuous course of console brackets, regularly spaced. The small lantern, with a cross above, crowns the belfry; all of which are of wood. The cupola roof is a golden colored composition roofing. The two bells were donated by the Dominguez family in memory of their parents, Maria Engracia and Emmanuel, in January of 1888. They were remotely controlled by power equipment in 1953. The central section of the tower, which once housed the Cathedral archives, connected directly to the rectory on the north by a bridge.

INTERIOR

Floor Plan: The Original plan was generally patterned on an early Christian Basilica form. Starting from the west, were doors leading to a narrow 10' deep vestibule, the width of the Cathedral, at either end of which were stairs leading to a small gallery above. From the vestibule, one entered the central nave, about 40' wide and flanked by side aisles about 18' wide. The nave was divided from the aisles by six bays of three centered arches supported by slender, fluted wood Corinthian columns spaced at 18' c.c. Beyond this, to the east, was a chancel separated from the nave by a communion rail and consisting of a Sanctuary on a raised platform (bema) and flanked north and south by sacristies. Beyond this, two additional sacristies, separated from the chancel by a brick wall, flanking the central crypt, with a depth of 17' by the width of the building. To the north was the old Rectory, which was replaced after the 1933 earthquake, and which is now connected by direct passage along a cloistered patio. To the southwest was the School. The Sanctuary contained the main central altar, now flanked by a brick recessed altar on the north and south walls.

The 1922 alterations included removal of the sacristies on each side of the Sanctuary to widen the chancel for ritual choir space. Major changes at this time also extended the west end to the street and replaced the west facade, as described above. The new narthex, now 13' deep by the width of the building, has

CAL-343

Page 9

stairs leading up to the gallery (balcony), which is now approximately 51' deep, beginning from the last westerly bay to the west wall. The top level of the gallery was designed to house the new "turbine blower" organ (finally completed in 1929 by the Wangerin Organ Company of Milwaukee), and the balance of the balcony provided more pews. A new semi-circular Baptistry was added at the south end of the narthex.

Eight confessionals were added during these alterations; three on each wall of the side aisles, projecting out from the building; and two were added at the west end of the aisles, one on each side under the gallery. The new west end extension, including the gallery was built of reinforced concrete supported on encased steel beams. Two new square columns, which are steel encased in concrete, were added under the gallery for additional support. Suspended light fixtures in the nave, on either side at the center of the bays, was also provided with special spots for the altars. In 1953, the east sacristies were remodeled by another firm and a new heating system added.

Flooring: The nave floor still has the original 2x12 joists at 16" c.c., with 1" sub-flooring and 1x4 T&G boards over. The 1923 alterations removed the linoleum and replaced it with 7/32" thick rubber tile and cove base. The chancel floor which previously was finished with mosaic tile (over wood construction) was removed in 1922 and refinished with an inlaid marble block pattern over a concrete bed. The old wood floor (sub-floor) was reconstructed and new wood sub-flooring laid over the old for this change. The new vestibule was finished with similar 12x12 blocks of inlaid Italian white and Belgian black marble and bordered with 6" dark marble.

Walls: The main original interior walls were of brick, finished with plaster. The alterations by John Austin at the west end were concrete for the main walls, hollow tile for non-bearing partitions. The narthex and stairways were finished with marble wainscot with frescoed plaster finish above; the gallery walls with metal lath and plaster. The new brick recessed confessionals were finished with oak veneer panelling as was the bulkhead of the gallery.

CAL-343
Page 10

Ceilings: The original barrel vault of the nave is unchanged and the curved wood lath and plaster can still be seen from the attic above, indicating a suspended ceiling. The side aisles have level plaster ceilings and appear to be original. The 1922 changes include decorating the chancel (Sanctuary) barrel vaulted ceiling, new suspended metal lath and plaster ceilings at the west end gallery and narthex, etc. The latter is divided into a central barrel vault, flanked by two lower level-coffered ceilings. The old nave was decorated by adding raised ribs across, from side to side, between the clerestories. New paint work, frescoes and gilded ornamentation were also added for old and new ceilings.

Doorways and Doors: The most notable interior doorway is the central pair at narthex leading to the center nave aisle. It is similar to the pair at the west entrance with raised and moulded oak panels, about 7'-9" high, above which is a matching solid transom; the finished width is about 7'-0". Above the transom is an arched and groined vaulted panel and ceiling with frescoed decorations. The side doors to the nave are similarly paneled with transoms, but shorter. These doors are 1-3/4" thick. Balance of doors, which were provided by the 1922 alterations are also oak paneled, without decorative transoms, set in wood frames, moulded casings, stops, single or in pairs. Two new doors were opened from the Sanctuary to the rear sacristies by Austin in 1922.

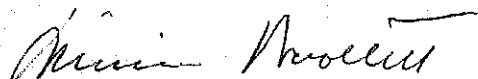
Trim: The alterations by John Austin in 1922 included cornice and running moulds in plaster, special ornamental "enriched mouldings" in and near the chancel, the coffered ceilings in the narthex, pilaster caps, scroll ornaments, egg and dart moulds for the confessionals, which are all custom moulded and cast plaster. Bronze grilles were also provided for the confessionals and the marble communion rail was straightened and lengthened. Existing wood base and shoe in the chancel were kept and matched for new additions. The wood base for the nave was replaced with new cove rubber. Miscellaneous wood casings at doors and windows over plaster were softwood. New wood bases at other than marble walls were of 1x8 with quarter-round moulds top and bottom. Exposed hardwood veneer is generally 1/8" oak plywood.

HABS
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CAL-343
Page 11

Hardware: In addition to the new trim by Austin, the main doors were provided with bronze ball-bearing hinges, thumb latches, bolts, and automatic closers. Brass kickplates are found at the narthex wood entrance doors. Aluminum hardware and trim was provided for the rear (east) sacristies during the 1953 alterations.

Submitted by,



William Woollett, AIA
AIA Preservation Committee

Prepared by,



Raymond Girvigian, AIA
Preservation Officer
Southern California Chapter, AIA

September 1963

APPROVED:

Charles S. Pope, AIA
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, Design and Construction
National Park Service

DATE: